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# Napoleon's Siege of Acre: A Reevaluation of the Historical and Archaeological Record

Morgan L. Breene  
morgan\_breene@my.uri.edu

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# Napoleon's Siege of Acre: A Re-evaluation of the Historical and Archaeological Record

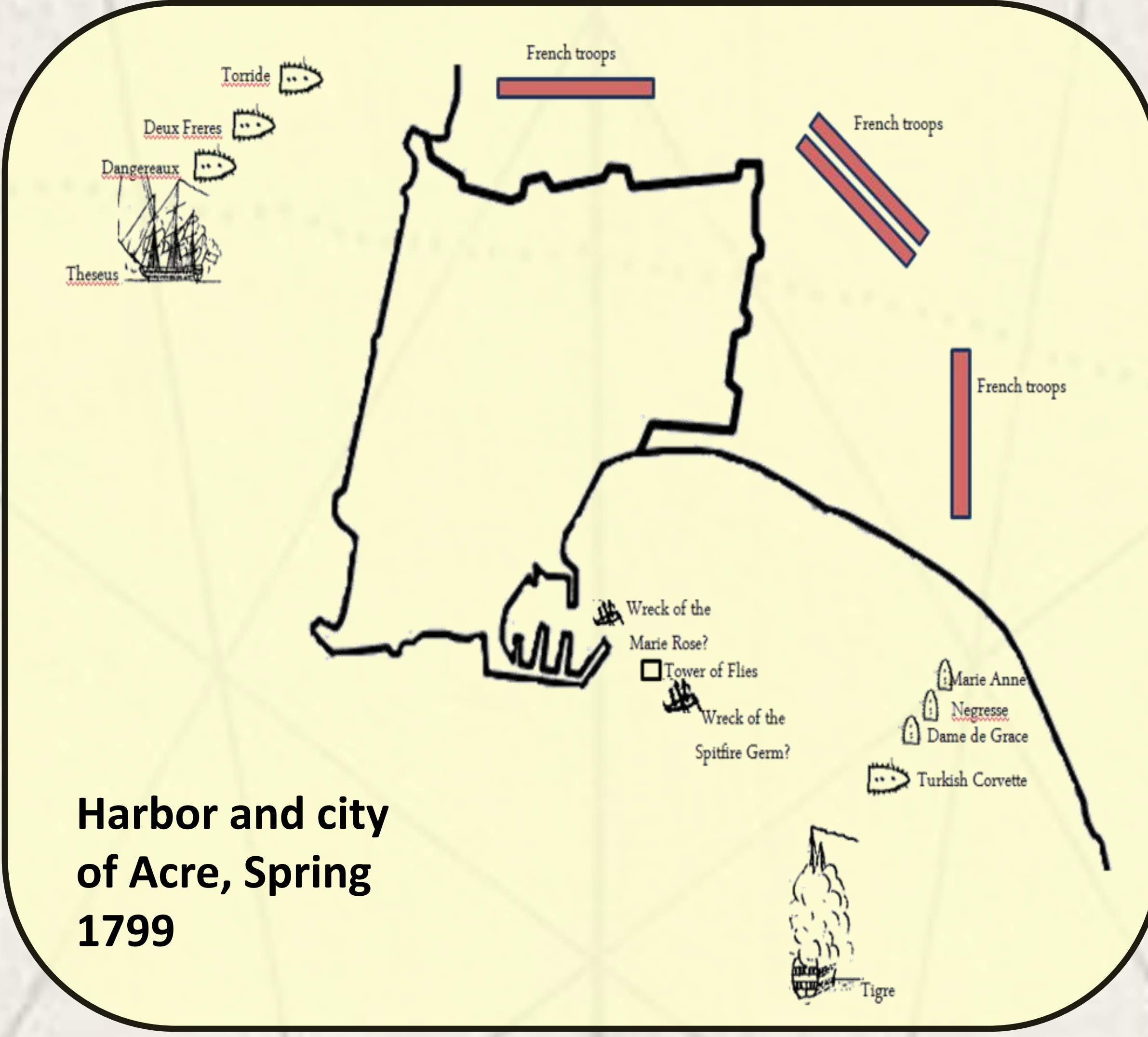
Morgan Breene— University of Rhode Island

Admiral Sir William Sidney Smith, the British commander sent to assist the Turkish ruler of Akko, Djezzar Pasha, in defending his city against Napoleon.

Napoleon Bonaparte, commander of the French army in Egypt, had to capture Akko in order to continue his march through the Middle East.

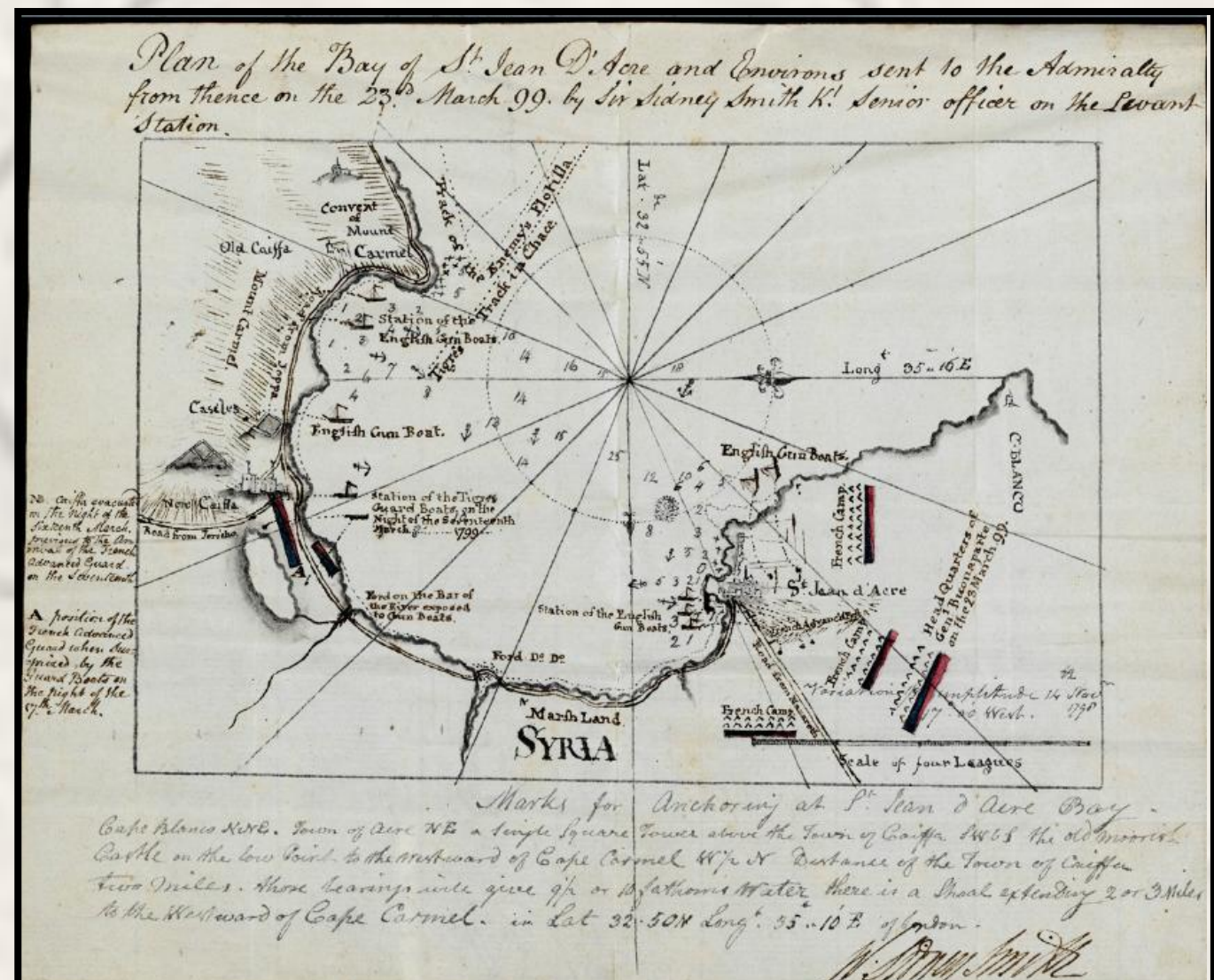
**NAPOLEON'S FAILED SIEGE OF ACRE, ISRAEL IN THE SPRING OF 1799 WAS A TURNING POINT IN HIS eastern campaign. Had he gained control of the port, he would have been well-positioned to challenge Britain's influence in the East. Understandably, underwater archaeologists have been eager to discover evidence of the siege in the port. The task is complicated by the presence of wreckage from naval conflicts of the 1830s and 1840, and also the persistence of misinformation presented in the original study of the harbor.**

**The Siege: 18 March- 20 May, 1799**  
 WHEN NAPOLEON LAID SIEGE TO ACRE, it was without his major artillery. Smith captured the gun boats carrying Napoleon's artillery on the 18 March, and put both to good use harassing the French. Napoleon was eventually forced to retreat following massive loss of life. Smith positioned the shallow draft gun boats in the harbor and along the shore where his larger warships could not go. Here the small vessels were most effective as gun platforms against the French, who were camped outside the walls of the city.



Harbor and city of Acre, Spring 1799

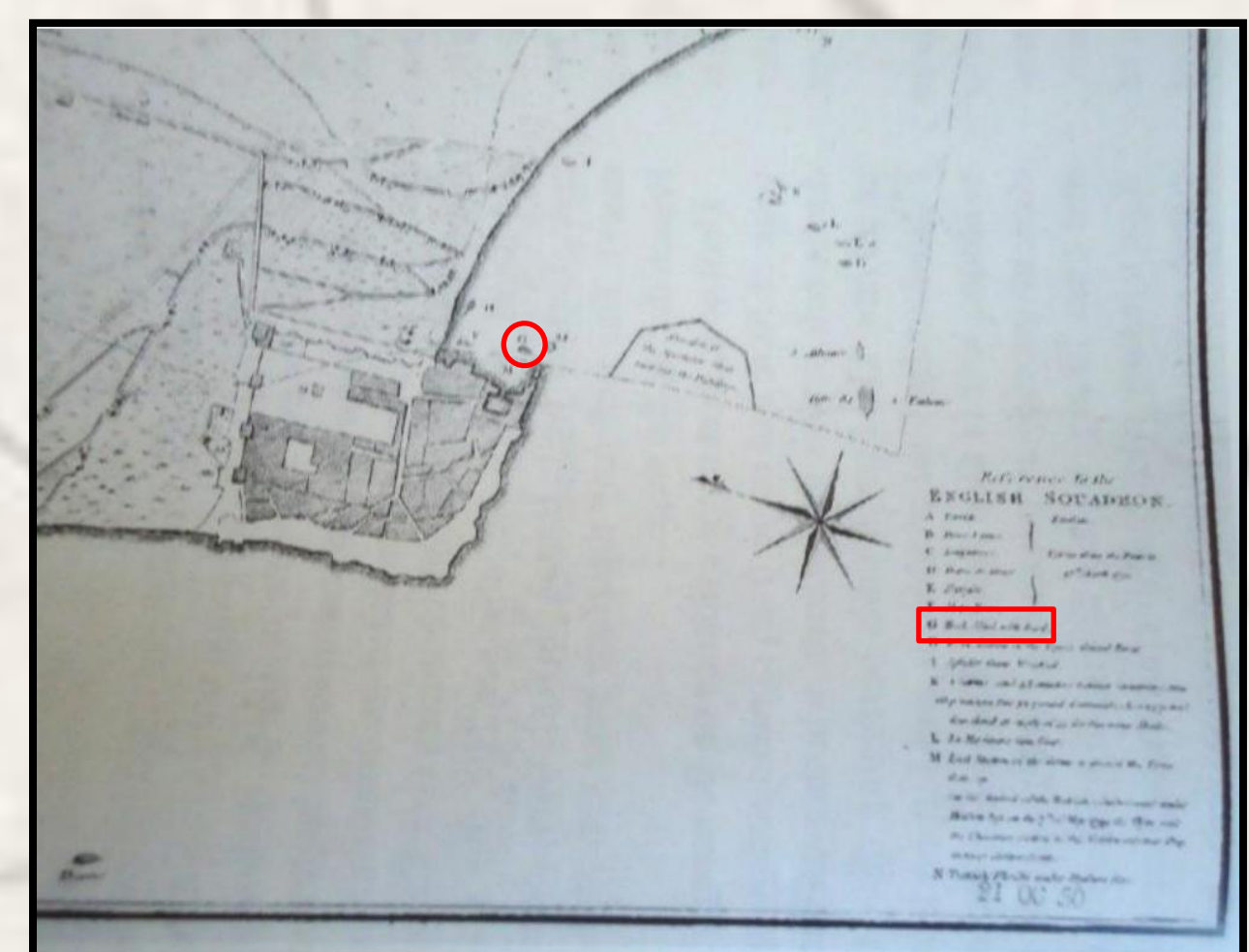
**The Shipwrecks: The Marie Rose and the Spitfire Germ**  
 ON 28 MARCH, 1799, a massive storm hit Acre. Smith left one of his support vessels, the *Alliance*, and gunboats in place to prevent the French from making too much headway. He reports that they "fortunately rode [the gale] out, except one." This victim may have been the gunship *Marie Rose*, captured by Smith on 18 March (below right). A second ship, Transport No. 1, was also lost in the storm at an unknown latitude. Transport No. 1 may be the *Spitfire Germ*, shown in a sketch by Robert Kerr Porter (below bottom).



Sketch produced by Smith for the Admiralty. Dated 23 March 1799

**The "Block ship" Theory**  
 INITIAL SURVEY OF THE HARBOR in the 1960's resulted in the excavation of the "Akko Tower Wreck." It was originally suggested that the wreck, which lacked superstructure and armor, was scuttled by Smith to prevent French access to the harbor.

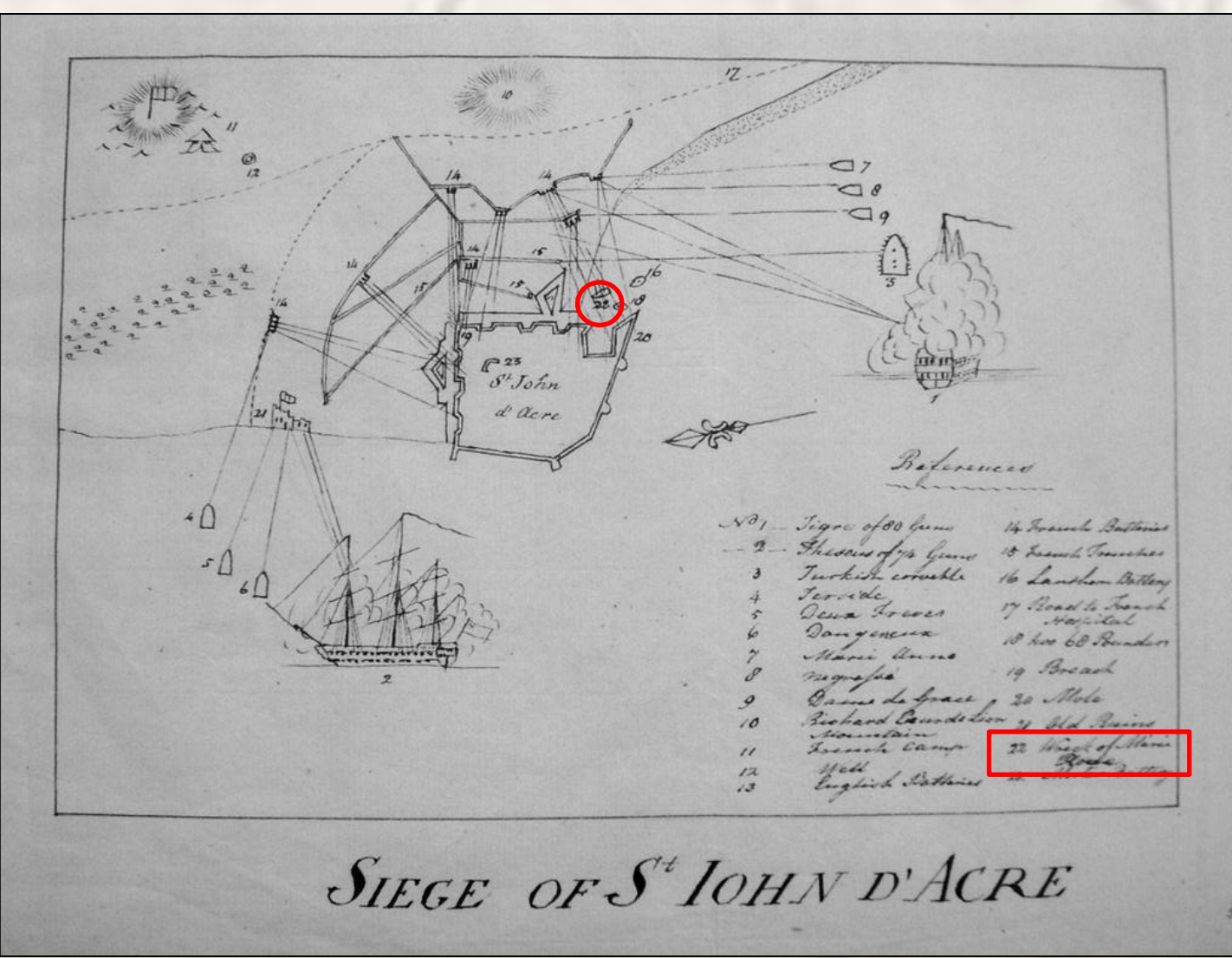
There is no historical evidence to suggest this was the case. Flinder and Linder (1993; 222) allude to a map which labels a "ship filled with sand" (bottom left, presumably). Smith, however, had no reason to sink a block ship. Any wrecks from 1799 must be explained in a different manner.



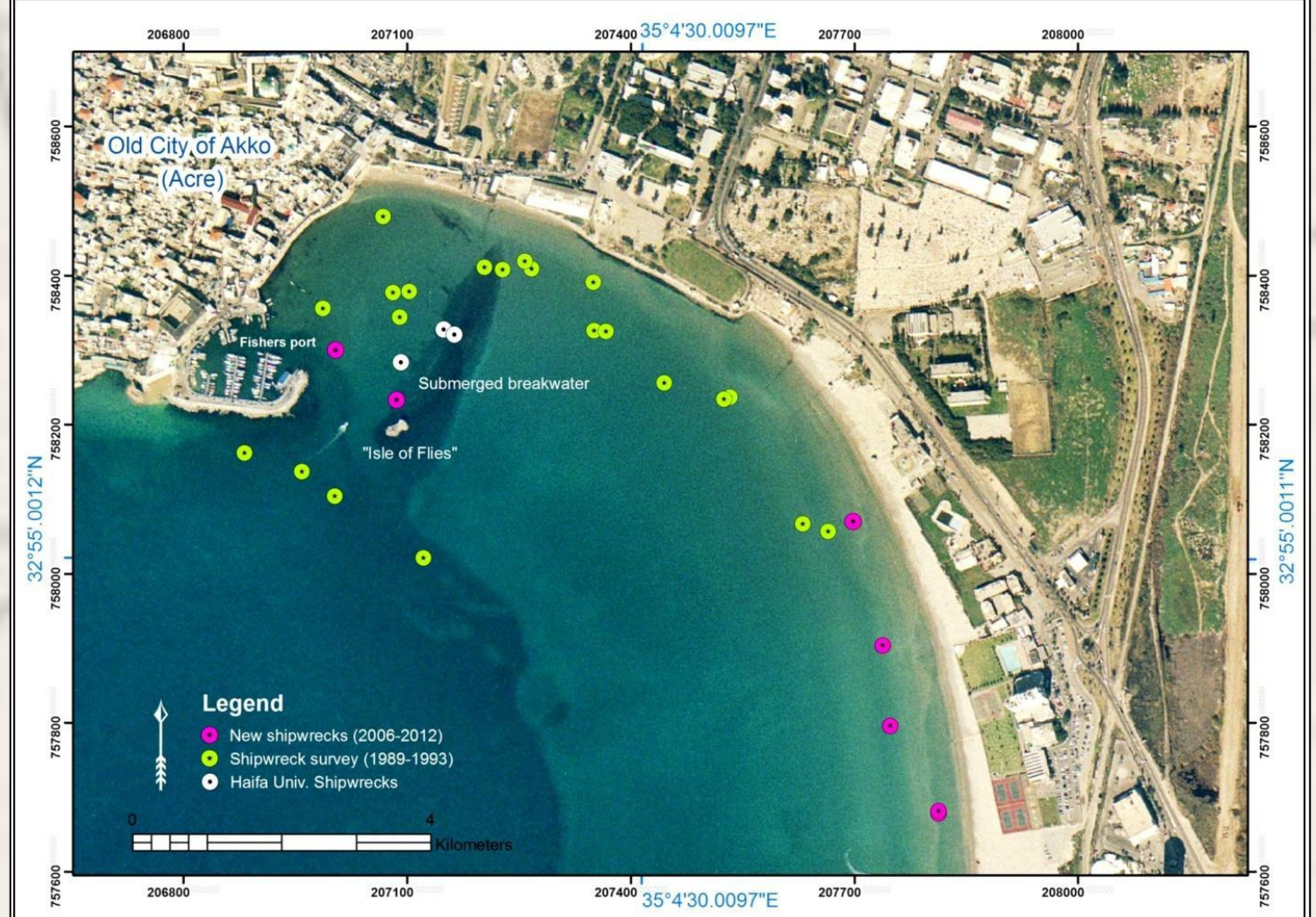
Map allegedly used by Flinder and Linder (1993; 222) to develop the "block ship" theory. Reference G shows a "Ship filled with sand" at the mouth of the harbor.

**2011 URI/IAA survey**  
 DURING THE 2011 SEASON, a team of archaeologists from the University of Rhode Island, the University of Louisville, Kentucky, and the Israel Antiquities Authority were testing a Syqwest Stratabox subbottom profiler when they identified several targets that may be associated with the siege.

This prompted the investigation that led to the undermining of the block ship theory and the search to locate and identify the ships most likely to have been lost in the siege.

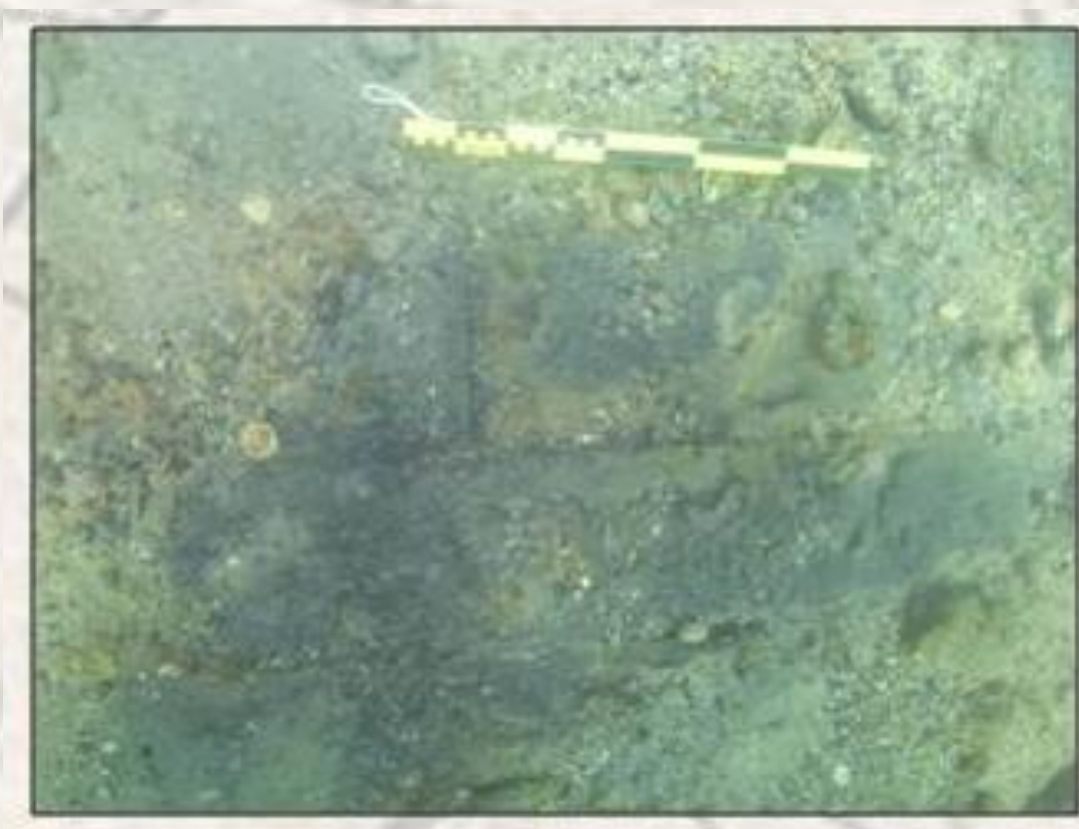


Map of unknown origin showing the "Wreck of Marie Rose" (Reference 22)

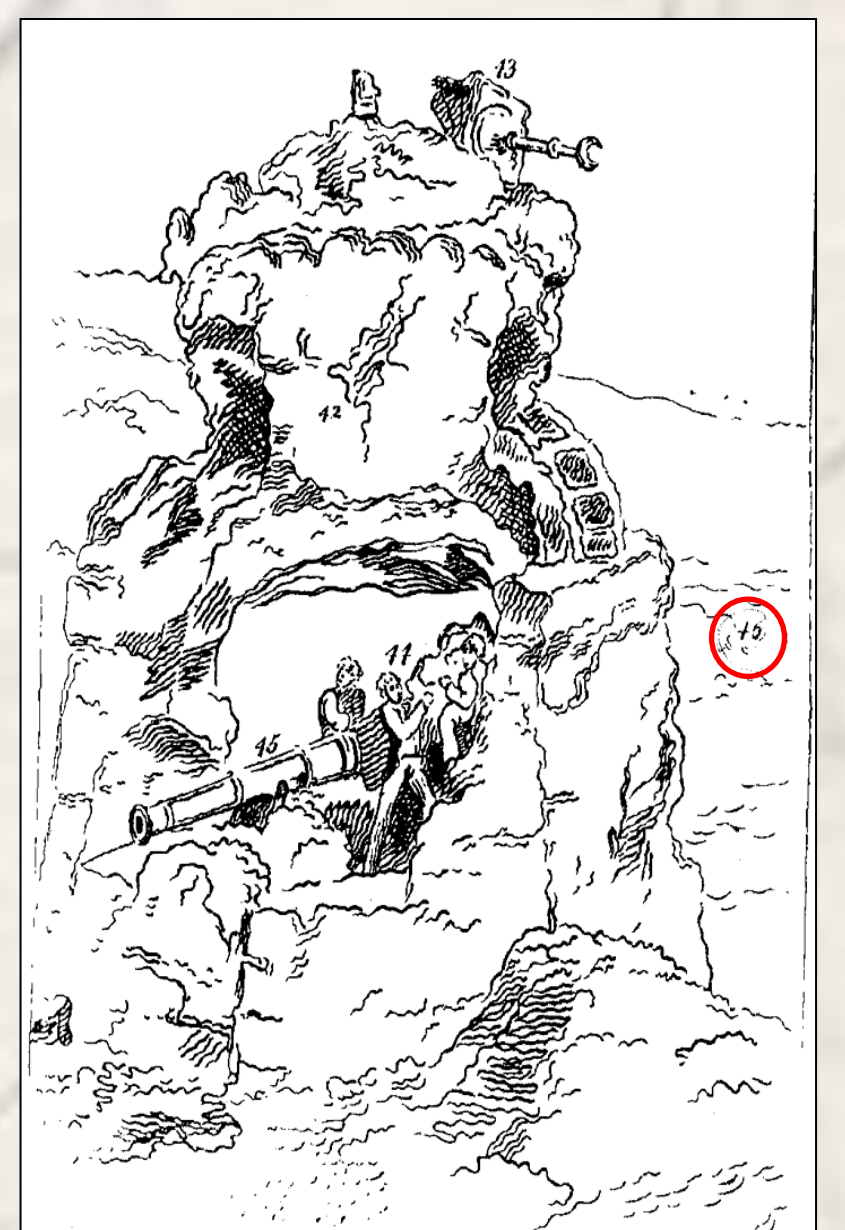


There are currently two sub-seafloor targets which may be the *Marie Rose* (pink target at the marina entrance) and the *Spitfire Germ* (not indicated on map). Wreckage from an additional 18<sup>th</sup> century vessel was found north of the Tower of Flies by the URI-IAA project in 2011, but this material has not yet been identified (pink target by the Tower of Flies).

**Conclusions**  
 HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESEARCH into the 1799 siege of Acre by URI and the IAA between 2011 and 2013 has revealed that previous interpretations of Smith's strategy cannot be supported. Instead, it appears that the two small ships Smith lost in the storm, the *Marie Rose* and the *Spitfire Germ* were stationed close to shore, used as platforms for British guns. IAA and URI investigations of the harbor have identified two shipwreck targets that likely correspond to the *Marie Rose* and *Spitfire Germ*. Further archaeological investigation will be needed to confirm this investigation.



Part of a buried 18<sup>th</sup> century ship discovered near the Tower of Flies by the URI-IAA in 2011. The identity of the ship is not known but it may also be from the 1799 siege.



46 A POINT OF LAND, upon which the *Spitfire Germ* was wrecked in a heavy gale soon after the commencement of the Siege, when the whole of the squadron excepting the *Alliance* frigate and the *Prize* Gun boats took shelter on the other side of the Bay—of those vessels caught in the gale, the *Spitfire* was the only one which did not ride it out.

**References**  
 Flinder, A., et al. 1993. "Survey of the ancient harbour of Akko, 1964-1966." In Heltzer, M, Segal, A, and Kaufman, D. (eds.) Studies in Archaeology and History of Ancient Israel, Haifa University Press, Haifa, pp. 199-225.

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